

JOINT HEARING ON THE LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION OF
THE VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS

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WEDNESDAY, MARCH 4, 2020

United States Senate,
Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
House of Representatives,
Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
Washington, D.C.

The committees met, pursuant to notice, at 10:00 a.m.,
in Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Jerry
Moran and Hon. Mark Takano, Chairmen of the Committees,
presiding.

Senators Present: Senators Moran, Boozman, Rounds,
Tillis, Sullivan, Tester, Brown, Manchin, and Sinema.

Representatives Present: Representatives Takano,
Brownley, Lamb, Pappas, Cunningham, Cisneros, Allred,
Underwood, Roe, Bilirakis, and Roy.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN TAKANO

Chairman Takano. Good morning, everyone. I am honored
to be here truly with my colleague, Chairman Moran, Senator
Tester, who should be joining us, Ranking Member Roe, and
all of the members of the House and Senate Committees on
Veterans' Affairs.

Today we will hear the testimony from Veterans of

1 Foreign Wars, and before we get started, I would like to
2 recognize our guests from my home State of California. Are
3 you here?

4 All right. All right. Thank you. We can give them a
5 hand.

6 [Applause.]

7 Chairman Takano. Well, thank you.

8 These annual hearings are critical so Congress can hear
9 directly from organizations that work with and support
10 veterans and their families every day. This work provides
11 insights to the challenges faced by veterans and
12 opportunities for improving VA's policies and programs.
13 These committees rely heavily on the veterans service
14 organizations to provide the voice of the veteran, to
15 highlight for us the issues that veterans are facing across
16 the country, and I am grateful to the VFW and other VSOs for
17 providing us that insight.

18 I am heartened to see that we share many of the same
19 priorities, and not to steal your thunder, but I would like
20 to underscore just some of the priorities that we do share.

21 Our veteran population is increasingly more diverse.
22 We must support our women veterans, our LGBTQ veterans,
23 minority veterans, and Native American veterans, and we must
24 ensure that VA provides culturally competent care for all
25 eligible veterans. We must ensure that VA provides a safe

1 environment of care for veterans who may have experienced
2 military sexual trauma and improve how VA evaluates claims
3 related to those traumatic experiences.

4 As Chairman, I made reducing veteran suicide my number
5 one priority and adopted a comprehensive evidence-based
6 framework to address this crisis from every angle. Our
7 approach takes into account multiple factors that could
8 reduce veteran suicide, everything from lowering economic
9 burdens to increasing access to care--actually, let me say
10 that again--everything from lowering economic burdens to
11 increasing access to care and improving crisis intervention
12 for those at higher risk.

13 Now, earlier this year, I introduced H.R. 5697, the
14 Veterans Access Act, to ensure all veterans, regardless of
15 their discharge status or eligibility for other VA health
16 care benefits, have access to emergency mental health care
17 they need without ever seeing a bill. When a veteran is in
18 crisis, worried about how they will pay for their care
19 should be the last thing on their minds. This legislation
20 is the latest of many actions our committee has taken, and I
21 am looking forward to working with Chairman Moran, Ranking
22 Member Tester, and Ranking Member Roe to pass this bill and
23 save veterans' lives.

24 We also must do better when it comes to caring for
25 veterans who have been exposed to toxic substances in the

1 course of their service. The Department of Defense and VA
2 must better track those exposures and be better prepared to
3 treat those veterans when they leave the service, and that
4 is why I recently sent a letter with 77 of my colleagues
5 pressing President Trump to take necessary corrective action
6 and add four diseases to the Department's presumptive list
7 that we know to be linked to Agent Orange exposure. This
8 will ensure veterans can access crucial VA health care and
9 disability benefits. We are still awaiting a response from
10 the administration.

11 You identified concerns in multiple areas that speak to
12 VA's information technology infrastructure, and I agree that
13 we must ensure that VA has the proper funding to ensure a
14 21st century technology infrastructure to support its
15 multitude of systems.

16 We must also ensure that VA updates its infrastructure
17 and its aging IT systems while making wise use of taxpayer
18 funds.

19 I also thank the Veterans of Foreign Wars and other
20 VSOs for holding the line, for taking care of America's
21 veterans, and for keeping Congress and the administration
22 accountable to those brave men and women. I look forward to
23 hearing your testimony and thank you for all the work that
24 you have done in the service of veterans and their families.

25 I now end my opening remarks, and I would like to

1 recognize Chairman Moran for his opening statement. Mr.
2 Chairman?

3 OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN MORAN

4 Chairman Moran. Chairman Takano, thank you very much.
5 It has been a pleasure to date to work with you, and I am
6 pleased to join you here today as we welcome the VFW to our
7 Joint Committee hearing.

8 I welcome the Veterans of Foreign Wars here today as
9 well as the hundreds of VFW members and Auxiliary members
10 who have joined us.

11 My father, a World War II veteran, was an active member
12 of the VFW in my hometown and its post, and I grew up having
13 highest regard, which has continued through the years, for
14 VFW and its members.

15 I extend a special welcome to my Kansas VFW members,
16 and not to be outdone by California, I need to ask them to
17 please stand and wave so that we can recognize you.

18 [Applause.]

19 Chairman Moran. Thank you for the relationship, the
20 friendship, and the working times that we have together and
21 for what you do for veterans and in communities across
22 Kansas.

23 Thank you to all of you from all over the country who
24 took time away from your day-to-day responsibilities to be
25 here, for making the trip to our Nation's Capital. I think

1 it is one of the most significant days, one of the times in
2 which I feel greater levels of hope and optimism is when I
3 walk the halls of these office buildings in the United
4 States Capitol, and I see VFW members and the Auxiliary and
5 their presence. We know that you are here, and it reminds
6 us of our responsibilities.

7 I indicated the other day during a hearing that I often
8 walk down to the Lincoln Memorial for the purposes of
9 walking by the World War II Memorial, for purposes of
10 walking by the Vietnam Wall, and coming back by the Korean
11 War Memorial, and it is a reminder, just as your presence
12 here today is a reminder, that those of us who serve in
13 public office need to use you as role models to those
14 reminders of those walls and those memorials. Not a person
15 there served their country for purposes of Republicans or
16 Democrats. They served their country for purposes of
17 Americans, for their families at home, for making the world
18 a better place. We need that same attitude and approach,
19 and I thank you for being the role models that you are at
20 home and here in the Nation's Capital.

21 Commander Schmitz, thank you for your advocacy. The
22 work the VFW does on behalf of our Nation's veterans is
23 critical. Thank you for the leadership role that you have
24 assumed, and this committee is lucky to have you here today,
25 fortunate to hear what you have to say, as we make our

1 decisions in public policy and legislation about what we can
2 do, what we need to prioritize.

3 My top legislative priority, unless you tell me
4 otherwise in your testimony, is to give the VA and local
5 communities the authority and the resources to help at-risk
6 veterans find hope and stay off the path of suicide. VFW
7 has consistently advocated for a focused and coordinated
8 effort among Congress, the VA, and stakeholders to
9 effectively address veterans' mental health needs and help
10 prevent veteran suicide.

11 I come from the rural part of Kansas, but I represent
12 the entire State, rural, urban, and suburban. The
13 challenges are there everywhere, and each may need a bit of
14 uniqueness to find the right solution to meet the needs of
15 those who contemplate suicide and those who need mental
16 health services.

17 I also want to make certain that the MISSION Act, a
18 piece of legislation that I think is one of the most
19 significant for Congress to pass in recent time related to
20 the VA--I want to make certain that the VA is consulting
21 with veterans service organizations, that they are paying
22 attention to the VFW and its members, that they are talking
23 to Congress. If we fail, if the VA fails to implement the
24 MISSION Act in the appropriate way that cares for veterans
25 in their circumstances, we will have missed a tremendous

1 opportunity for and improving VA.

2 I share these goals. I know with my colleagues here
3 sitting next to me, these ought to be and are bipartisan,
4 bicameral issues that we can resolve.

5 I was asked this morning what one of my other
6 committees was going to accomplish this year, and
7 unfortunately, the answer that I gave was one I hate, which
8 is, well, it is an election year, so I am not certain we are
9 going to be able to do much of anything. Well, in this
10 place, there are elections all the time. It is an election
11 year seemingly every year, and if that is the excuse that we
12 cannot do something because it is an election year, then we
13 will be unable to do anything always. That is a terrible
14 outcome. It is a terrible outcome for the American people.
15 It is a terrible outcome for those who served our country
16 and sacrificed that the democracy can work.

17 The person I was talking to said, "Well, it is a good
18 thing that you chair the Veterans Committee because that is
19 still the one place where Republicans and Democrats get
20 alone," and we need to make certain that that is true and
21 that is continues.

22 I pledge to Chairman Takano and to my colleagues here,
23 certainly to Senator Tester, my Ranking Member, our Ranking
24 Member of our Veterans Committee, that that needs to remain
25 true, and we owe it to you, those who are present with us

1 today.

2 Commander Schmitz, we look forward to your
3 presentation. I look forward to working together with you.

4 I enjoyed joining the VFW when you had your convention
5 in Kansas City a year ago, and I look forward to your
6 return. We are honored that Kansas City--President Trump
7 would say, "It is probably in Kansas," but the Kansas City,
8 Missouri, is the home of the National Headquarters for the
9 VFW. Just like we hold dear and own the Chiefs, we look at
10 your presence in Kansas City as being in Kansas, and we are
11 delighted that that presence exists. We know that you bring
12 from the Heartland and across the country a message for us
13 today, and I look forward to hearing it.

14 Thank you.

15 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Chairman Moran.

16 I now call on Ranking Member, Dr. Roe, for his opening
17 statement.

18 OPENING STATEMENT OF DR. ROE

19 Dr. Roe. Thank you, Chairman.

20 Welcome, Commander Schmitz and VFW members and members
21 of the VFW Auxiliary, the people who do all the work.

22 [Laughter.]

23 [Applause.]

24 Dr. Roe. It is a distinct pleasure for me to be here
25 today with Chairmen Moran and Takano and Ranking Member

1 Tester, all good friends, at the joint hearing today, and I
2 appreciate your attendance.

3 It has been an honor and a privilege for me to attend
4 these hearing for a dozen years that I have spent in
5 Congress, but this will be the last time I will be with you
6 because I am retiring at the end of this year, and I realize
7 what a good politician I am because I made, in my district,
8 some of the Republicans and all the Democrats happy by my
9 retirement.

10 [Laughter.]

11 Dr. Roe. I look out here and I am going to veer from
12 my notes just a moment and tell you that as a veteran, the
13 2nd Infantry Division, I was in the Army 47 years ago. I
14 look out here at this group of men and women, and you are
15 the reason we have a free country. I was able to be raised
16 on a very small farm in Tennessee, to be able to go to
17 medical school, and to be able to serve this great Nation.
18 You are the reason that I was able to do that because we are
19 free because of the sacrifice that each one of you made for
20 this country and you continue to make because you continue
21 to come here every year and pack this room and advocate for
22 me for the people I will never be able to do enough for.

23 I got home with absolutely no injuries at all. Some
24 people think I was injured, but I think I am fine.

25 [Laughter.]

1 Dr. Roe. But so many people came home with
2 catastrophic injuries. I cannot do enough for those men and
3 women who served this country and sacrificed and changed
4 their entire life because of their service to our great
5 Nation. So I thank you for what you have done, and I
6 appreciate your service and your continued service to the
7 country, years after many of you left the military.

8 It is because of organizations like the VFW that my
9 time in Congress has been so fulfilling, and I know that I
10 am leaving this town in very good hands.

11 The men and women of VFW and thousands of whom are
12 veterans themselves work tirelessly to care for those who
13 bear the wounds of war and empower them to succeed, and
14 before I continue with my opening remarks, I would like to
15 take a moment personally to thank each and every one of you
16 for your sacrifice.

17 I want to welcome the VFW's national leadership team.
18 It is a pleasure to have you all in the Capitol, and I want
19 to also extend a special welcome to your commander-in-chief,
20 William "Doc" Schmitz. Thank you. We are very glad to have
21 you here. Sir, thank you for your service to our Nation and
22 the Navy and for your leadership within the VFW and for
23 being with us today.

24 I also want to acknowledge, as I did previously, the
25 members of the Auxiliary. Thank you all for being here.

1 Many of you wear many hats as spouses, as volunteers,
2 as caregivers, and many more, and your service to those who
3 have served our country does not go unnoticed. And I thank
4 all of you for that.

5 Finally, I want to say a special hello for the VFW
6 members in my home State of Tennessee. If you are in the
7 audience, please hold your hand up or stand, if you can. I
8 know they are here because I have a list of you.

9 [Applause.]

10 Dr. Roe. We are undergoing a tough time in Tennessee
11 right now. We have lost at least 25 of our citizens in a
12 terrible tornado around Nashville. So please keep us in
13 your prayers.

14 For over 100 years, the VFW has been a leading voice
15 for our Nation's veterans, and with VFW support, the VA has
16 undergone a transformation. Veterans have greater access to
17 care, greater control over their health care decisions at VA
18 than ever before. Veterans can use their GI Bill benefits
19 whenever they choose. Veterans' unemployment has reached
20 near record lows. Veterans are getting their appeals for
21 disability compensation decided faster and more efficiently.
22 Veterans of the Blue Water Navy are finally receiving the
23 benefits they have earned. The widow's tax on dependents
24 and indemnity compensation benefits has been repealed.
25 Fewer veterans are homeless. Fewer veterans are dependent

1 on opioids.

2 The VA has more funding and more staff and is now one
3 of the top six best places to work in the Federal
4 Government. This success is due to sustained bipartisan
5 congressional commitment to prioritize veterans' needs, the
6 Veteran First focus of the Trump administration, and the
7 continued advocacy of organizations like the VFW.

8 VFW leaders here in Washington continue to provide
9 valuable information and feedback to Congress to help us
10 ensure that veterans can achieve their full potential. A
11 great example of the importance of our partnership with the
12 VFW actually occurred during last year's joint hearings.

13 As we were sitting before the VFW and other VSOs to
14 hear your testimony, the House was preparing to vote on and
15 pass H.R. 1112. H.R. 1112 has the potential to add names of
16 over 1.7 million veterans for the service-connected
17 adjudication by VA of mental issues to the FBI's NICS list.
18 If this bill were enacted in its current form, those
19 veterans could be barred from possessing or purchasing a
20 firearm. It is unfair to assume that just because a veteran
21 has a mental health condition that they are a danger to
22 themselves or others. Equating the threat of violence with
23 a mental health diagnosis reinforces dangerous stereotypes
24 and stigma against those with mental illness that can
25 prevent them from getting the help and increase feelings of

1 shame, isolation, and suicidal ideation. Moreover, any
2 decision that would infringe on a veteran's constitutional
3 right should be handled by a judiciary authority and not a
4 VA bureaucrat.

5 I would like to thank the VFW for bringing the
6 unintended consequences of 1112 to the Judiciary Chairman
7 Nadler's attention prior to the House passage of this bill.
8 Due to the VFW's actions, Chairman Nadler committed to
9 addressing the injustice that H.R. 1112 would cause for our
10 Nation's veterans. Regrettably, it has been a year since
11 the VFW raised these issues, and I have yet to see any
12 proposals from the House majority that would correct this
13 problem.

14 As you can see, our work is not over, but I know that
15 the VFW will continue to be a strong advocate for protecting
16 a veteran's Second Amendment rights, and that together we
17 will be able to keep building our successes for our Nation's
18 veterans and their families.

19 I salute you, and, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

20 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Dr. Roe.

21 I now call on Ranking Member Senator Tester for his
22 opening comments.

23 OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR TESTER

24 Senator Tester. Thank you, Chairman Takano, and I want
25 to say good afternoon to everybody that is in the room.

1 Commander Schmitz, I am honored to have you and your
2 leadership team with us today. You are very well served by
3 your legislative service folks. I cannot tell you how much
4 my team and I depend upon their advice and their
5 perspective.

6 Representative Roe, I just want to tell you--and it was
7 the same with Senator Corker from your State--this is one
8 Democrat that is not happy with your retirement, okay?

9 Look, I want to take a moment to recognize the
10 Montanans in the room here today, and I hope they are in the
11 room and not in the anteroom, as with the legion, Chairman
12 Moran.

13 Tom Johnson, Harold Wheeler, Tim Peters, could you guys
14 stand up? Ron Merwin, Jack Hawley, Art Whidhalm and his
15 wife Marilyn. Thanks, guys.

16 [Applause.]

17 Senator Tester. I am just going to tell you on a side
18 note, yesterday they were in my office, and we were talking
19 about the priorities of the VFW. These folks presented me
20 with a plaque, as many of you know, because I have brought
21 it out in previous hearings.

22 As a junior high and high school student, I played Taps
23 at many a funeral. They gave me a plaque with a bugle on
24 it, and it even works. I played the plaque yesterday, guys.

25 [Laughter.]

1 Senator Tester. I want to thank you, everybody in the
2 room, including my friends from Montana for the work that
3 you do for your individual States and for the Nation.

4 Commander, I have said this many times before, and it
5 is true today as it was when I have said it previously. We
6 are here because Congress needs to take its cues from you.

7 VFW members are the beneficiaries of VA health care,
8 and they utilize its programs every day. You know better
9 than any one of us sitting at this dais how the VA is
10 performing nationwide and the improvements that should be
11 made on behalf of the families and the veterans. We hold
12 these hearings because only VSOs can help Congress folks on
13 what veterans need and how to make sure that the VA is
14 equipped to deliver those needs.

15 Commander Schmitz, I need to hear from the VA whether
16 the VA is operating in a transparent manner as they execute
17 the largest overhaul of veterans health care in a
18 generation; that is, the VA MISSION Act.

19 I need to know our views on gender disparities at the
20 VA and what Congress can do to push the VA to provide more
21 equitable treatment of our women veterans.

22 I need to know how toxic exposure impacts your members
23 from Agent Orange, presumption conditions to burn pits.

24 When it comes to mental health treatment and suicide
25 prevention, I need to know where the VA is doing a good job

1 and where they need to improve.

2 As you know, as lot was accomplished last year for
3 veterans, including passage of the VA MISSION Act, Appeals
4 Modernization, the Colmery GI Bill. That list goes on. It
5 is imperative that the VA provide regular opportunities to
6 hear from the VFW and other groups about implementing these
7 laws. VA needs to better understand how the decision it
8 makes will affect veterans as they receive veterans
9 benefits, and the VA cannot gain an understanding unless it
10 listens to veterans.

11 Commander Schmitz, we are here to listen to you. The
12 voice that you and your members provide is an important
13 source of information as we attempt to do right by all
14 veterans.

15 I want to welcome you again. I want to thank you for
16 what you and your organization do no behalf of disabled
17 veterans, on behalf of veterans and their families. Thank
18 you for being here.

19 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Ranking Member Tester.

20 Now I would like to recognize VFW Executive Director
21 B.J. Lawrence to introduce the VFW leadership.

22 Mr. Lawrence?

23 Mr. Lawrence. Thank you.

24 Members of the Senate and House Veterans' Committees, I
25 am honored to have the privilege of introducing the National

1 Officers of the VFW and Auxiliary. Mr. Chairman, please
2 allow me to ask those introduced to please remain standing,
3 and I wish to request the audience to hold its applause
4 until all have been introduced.

5 From our Auxiliary to the Veterans of Foreign Wars of
6 the United States, our National President, Peggy Haake from
7 Hawaii; Auxiliary Senior Vice President Sandra Onstwedder of
8 Michigan; Auxiliary Junior Vice President Jean Hamil from
9 Florida; Auxiliary National Secretary-Treasurer Ann
10 Panteleakos from Connecticut; Auxiliary Legislative
11 Ambassador Mercie Woolfolk from Illinois; and our VFW Junior
12 Vice Commander-in-Chief's wife, Megan Mihelcic from
13 Illinois.

14 Now our National Officers of the Veterans of Foreign
15 Wars of the United States, our Senior Vice Commander-in-
16 Chief, Harold "Hal" Roesch from Virginia; Junior Vice
17 Commander-in-Chief Matthew "Fritz" Mihelcic from Illinois;
18 Adjutant General Kevin Jones from Missouri; Quartermaster
19 General Debra Anderson from Missouri; Judge Advocate General
20 J. Douglas "Doug" Whitaker from Nebraska; Surgeon General
21 Curtis "Doc" Bohlman from Oklahoma; our National Chaplain,
22 James "Jim" Jenkins from Kansas; National Chief of Staff
23 Paul R. Phillips from Delaware; Inspector General Duane T.
24 Sarmiento from New Jersey; and our Chairman of the VFW
25 National Legislative Committee, Ronald Rusakiewicz from

1 Connecticut; Director VFW National Legislative Service,
2 Carlos Fuentes from Maryland; Director VFW National Veterans
3 Service, Ryan Gallucci from Maryland.

4 I would also like to recognize the VFW Student Fellows.
5 These student veterans exemplify the future leaders of our
6 great Nation.

7 And, finally, we have many of our past Commanders-in-
8 Chiefs with us and representing our great organization.

9 Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for allowing me to introduce
10 our leadership team.

11 [Applause.]

12 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Executive Director B.J.
13 Lawrence.

14 Now I would like to introduce my colleague, Congressman
15 Tom Reed, to introduce our special guest.

16 Congressman Reed?

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1 STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE TOM REED, A
2 REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF NEW
3 YORK

4 Mr. Reed. Well, thank you very much, Chairman Takano,
5 and to Chairman Moran and the Ranking Members, Senator
6 Tester and Dr. Roe, my colleagues in the House.

7 Doc, I have been looking forward to this for a little
8 while. I get to introduce you.

9 Mr. Schmitz. That is scary. Yeah.

10 Mr. Reed. I know it is.

11 I was so concerned because this guy right here works
12 for me, if you guys did not know that, but he has not caused
13 any national incidence or international incidences as he has
14 traveled around the world.

15 [Laughter.]

16 Mr. Reed. So let us not break that tradition today.

17 I just first want to continue the tradition of
18 recognizing the VFW and those members of New York who may be
19 in the room today.

20 Can we get a round of applause for our New York VFW
21 members?

22 [Applause.]

23 Mr. Reed. Chairman and Ranking Members, I come here
24 today as a proud member of the Sons of the VFW. My 11 older
25 brothers and sisters were taught in our family the lessons

1 of my father. My father served in World War II in Korea,
2 multiple Purple Hearts, Silver Star recipient, and I will
3 just tell you when he passed, when I was 2, I do not have
4 any independent recollection of him. But I do know as I sit
5 and stand in Fort Sheridan at his burial site that the
6 lessons that he installed in our family are deep when it
7 comes to military tradition and military commitment.

8 I know firsthand watching my mom raise the 12 of us
9 with the brothers and sisters from her military extended
10 family that helped and that came together in her time of
11 need to raise us, but more importantly, the lesson that was
12 taught from my dad and from my mom to us is that when it
13 comes to our veterans, you stand with our veterans not only
14 when they are deployed, but also and just most importantly,
15 you stand with their families, not only when they are
16 deployed, but also when they come home. And we stand with
17 them until their dying day.

18 I will tell you that we have carried that commitment in
19 our term in Congress because we have people like Doc
20 Schmitz. We have people like Doc Schmitz who is a true
21 leader when it comes to veteran services, his national
22 leadership in regards to the VFW post that he now serves in
23 as its National Commander-in-Chief.

24 And I just got to tell you, I have known Doc for many
25 years now, and I met him--and I will never forget the first

1 time I met him. My predecessor's tenure in Congress was
2 coming to an end, and we met on a street right outside of my
3 church in his car. He had indicated to me that he wanted to
4 potentially stay with our office. He recognized that it was
5 a Democratic office and I was a Republican coming into that
6 office, and when we had that conversation sitting in his
7 car, I looked Doc in the eye and I said, "Doc, you are
8 someone who is committed to vets. I do not care if you are
9 a Democrat. I do not care if you are a Republican. I share
10 that commitment, and I would be honored if you stayed in our
11 office." And that has now started a 10-year relationship
12 where Doc and I talk incessantly about veterans' issues,
13 veterans' constituent cases.

14 He still is on my staff. He will call me at many of
15 the State conventions. He will call me from VFWs where he
16 is maybe having a couple cocktails in the thing, and we will
17 get signed on to legislation in real time because, as I tell
18 Doc, you are my eyes and ears when it comes to veterans'
19 issues. And if Doc tells me that it is a priority for a
20 vet, I can tell you we will sign on and stand with Doc
21 Schmitz and the VFW to make sure that their priorities are
22 enacted.

23 So Doc served honorable in the United States Marine
24 Corps from 1966 to '70. He joined the VFW in our hometown
25 post, Post 524 in Corning New York, in the year of 1971.

1 That is a year very important to me because, as Doc knows,
2 that is the year of my birth. So that tells you how old
3 this guy is.

4 [Laughter.]

5 Mr. Reed. And you are not honoring the facial hair
6 policy of our office. You got to save that mustache off.

7 [Laughter.]

8 Mr. Reed. No, that is part of his schtick.

9 Mr. Schmitz. Maybe tomorrow.

10 Mr. Reed. That is part of his schtick.

11 I will just turn it over to you, Doc Schmitz, and to
12 you, Senator, and to the members of this committee. You
13 cannot have a better set of eyes and ears in the veterans
14 community than the National Commander of the VFW and all of
15 the members of the VFW that are represented here today.

16 But, in particular, Doc, it is an honor to have you on
17 our staff, and it is an honor, most importantly, to call you
18 a friend. Welcome. Love you, Doc.

19 [Applause.]

20 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Congressman Reed.

21 Commander Schmitz, you are recognized for 10 minutes to
22 present your opening statement.

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1 STATEMENT OF WILLIAM "DOC" SCHMITZ, COMMANDER-IN-
2 CHIEF, VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE U.S.;
3 ACCOMPANIED BY B.J. LAWRENCE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR;
4 RYAN GALLUCCI, NATIONAL VETERANS SERVICE DIRECTOR;
5 CARLOS FUENTES, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE SERVICE
6 DIRECTOR; AND RONALD RUSAKIEWICZ, NATIONAL
7 LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN

8 Mr. Schmitz. I will time it. Thank you, sir.

9 Congressman Reed, you said a lot of good stuff about
10 me, but you are the best. You are community-oriented, and I
11 will tell you what, you could not ask for a better guy to
12 represent the district. He is in the district, about the
13 district, about the people, taking care of business, and he
14 listens before he jumps.

15 Thank you very much, sir. Appreciate that.

16 Chairmen Moran and Takano, Ranking Members Tester and
17 Roe, it is my pleasure to represent 1.6 million members of
18 the Veterans of Foreign Wars and its Auxiliary.

19 I have the honor of visiting veterans, servicemembers,
20 and their families around the world, from Eureka, Montana;
21 to New York City; and all the way to Jerusalem. What I have
22 witnessed is impressive, a selfless commitment to defend our
23 country while in uniform, and millions still serve long
24 after leaving military service. Your work impacts us every
25 day. That is why the VFW thanks you for effectively

1 securing to pass the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act.

2 [Applause.]

3 Mr. Schmitz. Additionally, 65,000 military survivors
4 can now focus on healing from the loss of their loved ones
5 and taking care of their families and not worried about
6 struggling to pay their bills. This was made possible by
7 the elimination of the widow's tax.

8 [Applause.]

9 Mr. Schmitz. However, there is a long list of to-dos.
10 The brave men and women who wear the national uniform are
11 asked to serve in the most dangerous environments on earth.
12 They faithfully follow their orders with an implicit
13 understanding that America will take care of them when they
14 return home.

15 Vietnam veterans did our part. After winning every
16 battle they fought while in Vietnam, many of them have lost
17 their fight to the horrors of health conditions they
18 received from the exposure of Agent Orange. It is
19 unacceptable that the list of conditions presumed to be
20 associated with Agent Orange exposure do not include bladder
21 cancer, Parkinson's-like syndromes, hypertension, and other
22 conditions that scientists have said are connected to
23 military service, but VA keeps on not acknowledging it.

24 Congress and the VA must get together and take care of
25 their veterans.

1 [Applause.]

2 Mr. Schmitz. While we are at it, we need to set up a
3 process to ensure that it never happens again. It is time
4 for Congress to benefit--oh, my page got all screwed up
5 here. Look at that. It will not flip. I will bet you
6 never had that problem. Change the framework and provide
7 benefits to individuals who suffer from conditions
8 associated with toxic exposure, which is why the VFW
9 proposes a permanent, comprehensive, and evidence-based
10 framework for granting presumptive benefits for toxic
11 exposure.

12 For example, veterans who were exposed to burn pits are
13 now suffering from pulmonary conditions and rare cancers not
14 having to wait decisions and benefits like the Vietnam
15 veterans did.

16 The VFW promised proposed processes of granting
17 benefits would require VA to acknowledge the existing
18 research linking these conditions to their service and
19 establish benefits in support by science.

20 It is important to ensure veterans suffer from adverse
21 health conditions related to toxic exposure receive
22 benefits, but acknowledging the science also ensures VA can
23 improve the care that 90 percent of VFW members use and
24 prefer. The VFW members prefer the VA because they like the
25 quality of care they receive. The VA understands and knows

1 how to care for the service-connected disability, and it is
2 their service that has earned them the right to be taken
3 care of by the VA.

4 Our members indicate that the VA health care is
5 trending in the right direction. With VFW-supported VA
6 MISSION Act, less than a year out from implementation, the
7 VA still has a lot of work to do.

8 The number one recommendation of the VFW members on how
9 to improve VA health care is to hire more staff. A recent
10 VA Office of Inspector General report agrees with us. It
11 found that staffing shortages and ineffective processes at
12 VA medical centers have led to the veterans waiting an
13 average of--hold on to your hats on this one--66 days with
14 34 of those days waiting for staff to create the
15 authorization. That is a heck of a wait.

16 VA must fill the nearly 50,000 vacancies with high-
17 qualified applicants and install reforms that expedite
18 workflow to ensure veterans have timely access to high-
19 quality care they deserve.

20 VFW members are very pleased with the ability to
21 receive urgent care close to home, which was made possible
22 by the VA MISSION Act.

23 However, the VFW wholeheartedly disagrees with the VA's
24 decision to charge veterans for service-connected urgent
25 care. VA cannot charge for service care, regardless of

1 where it is coming.

2 [Applause.]

3 Mr. Schmitz. I am pleased to report despite a rocky
4 start, VA, by and large, is doing a good job of implementing
5 the VFW Champion Appeals Modification Act. Veterans are
6 receiving faster decisions on their claim, and their appeals
7 and legacy appeals waiting to be certified by the board have
8 decreased.

9 What we are concerned about, however, is that the VA
10 has made bureaucratic-centric decisions which delay the
11 timeliness and accuracy of the claims. For example, VA is
12 requiring veterans to use supplementary claim forms. It
13 should not no longer apply to them. This was done to
14 conform report requirements and make things easier for the
15 VA, not the veteran. The VFW does not care about VA
16 reporting requirements. We care about the requirements,
17 meaning claims will be delayed months and maybe even years
18 for the veterans. Submitting the wrong claim? You got to
19 be kidding me.

20 Congress must do its part in making sure the VA has
21 resources it needs in IT upgrades and promptly administering
22 benefits. ITs have been a problem, consistently a thorn in
23 the VA's side.

24 With implementing the VFW Champion Forever GI Bill, if
25 VA's education services had modern IT platforms, errors like

1 the delay in education payment to nearly 200,000 students
2 could have been avoided or at least minimized. To fix
3 overpayment issues, increased oversight, Congress must pass
4 the Protect the GI Bill.

5 [Applause.]

6 Mr. Schmitz. The VFW has been committed to helping
7 veterans suffering from mental health conditions before they
8 reach the point of crisis. Through our Unmet Needs program,
9 Project Atlas, and hosting A Day to Change Direction events
10 with our partners, Give an Hour, the VFW is leveraging a
11 footprint in communities throughout the world to do our part
12 in reducing the number of veterans who take their own lives.

13 VFW commands the members of committees that are making
14 efforts to find solutions. This is why we urge Congress to
15 pass the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health
16 Care Improvement Act of 2019, which would make significant
17 strides in improving mental health and suicide prevention
18 efforts.

19 Congress must also pass the Deborah Sampson Act, which
20 would ensure VA is ready and able to care for the fastest-
21 growing cohort of veterans population. It would expand
22 availability of women's health services through the VA,
23 improve current care such as counseling for sexual trauma
24 and make the VA services more accommodating to women.

25 [Applause.]

1 Mr. Schmitz. Life-altering traumatic brain injury also
2 merits serious consideration. I recently toured the Tampa
3 VA Medical Center Post-Deployment and Rehabilitation and
4 Evaluation Program, where medical professionals are helping
5 our special operations get back into the fight by improving
6 functional ability, reducing symptoms, stabilizing
7 psychological distress, restoring confidence, enhancing
8 family relationships, and assisting them in the long-term
9 recovery.

10 VA and DoD must expand this partnership to provide the
11 same opportunity to all of our men and women who continue to
12 face the harsh reality of living with TBI.

13 To establish a presumption of service connection of
14 disabilities associated with blast exposure, that is a big
15 boom. Congress must push the Blast Exposure Protection Act
16 of 2020.

17 [Applause.]

18 Mr. Schmitz. The VFW has long argued that military
19 retirement pay and VA service-connected disabilities
20 compensation are fundamentally different benefits and
21 granted for different reasons. This offset exists to
22 balance the budget on the backs of the American disabled
23 veteran. Congress must enact full concurrent receipt.

24 [Applause.]

25 Mr. Schmitz. Since 1929, the VFW has worked alongside

1 the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency and its predecessors
2 to reunite our fallen heroes with their loved ones. Due to
3 DPAA's efforts, the remains of 203 Americans have been
4 identified in the fiscal year 2018. However, sequestration
5 and continuing resolutions prevent from doing more.

6 Congress must pass the DPAA Support Act, which would exempt
7 DPAA employees who are conducting recovery missions from
8 being furloughed in the event of Government shutdown.

9 Locating, identifying, recovering the remains of those
10 who paid the ultimate sacrifice is a difficult and hazardous
11 mission. It is a promise to those serving in uniform to day
12 that no matter what, we will travel to the ends of the earth
13 to return you home to your families.

14 [Applause.]

15 Mr. Schmitz. This includes repatriation of 5,200
16 servicemembers who never came home from the Korean War.

17 In conclusion, the VFW stands ready to help you improve
18 care and benefits for American veterans, servicemembers,
19 their families, and survivors.

20 To this end, I ask you to dare to care and take care of
21 business. God bless America.

22 [Applause.]

23 [The prepared statement of Mr. Schmitz follows:]

24

25

1 Chairman Takano. Well, thank you for your testimony,
2 Doc Schmitz. Thank you very much.

3 I now want to recognize myself for 3 minutes for
4 questions.

5 Commander, I want to have you talk a bit about suicide
6 reduction. We have heard from VA in the past that they
7 cannot solve veteran suicide alone. It is going to take a
8 concerted effort among VA, the Government, and the
9 community, including VSOs, to move the needle on this
10 persistent and stubborn issue.

11 Can you tell me some of the ways in which VFW is
12 contributing? What is the VFW doing?

13 Mr. Schmitz. Sir, we made sure that we would be at the
14 Atlas grand opening for telehealth where the veterans in
15 isolated communities can literally get to speak to their
16 health care provider via telecommunications.

17 In our communities, we are engaging our communities by
18 going to various VA veterans meetings and working with the
19 health providers to get the word out and to destigmatize any
20 ridicule, any misunderstandings of the mental health issue.
21 Everybody gets depressed. Everybody does not feel good all
22 the time, and we need to get that out. We network with each
23 other. We call a buddy up once in a while, "How are you
24 doing? I have not seen you in a while. What is going on?"
25 When people are engaged and know people are watching, taking

1 care of them, interacting, that increases their self-
2 awareness and their own personal pride. Hopefully, working
3 strongly with the VA and the advice we get from the health
4 professionals, we can help them get into the community and
5 foster good relationships and drive veterans who are having
6 issues in to get some help.

7 Chairman Takano. Well, thank you. Thank you for your
8 organization's commitment.

9 I want to turn to veterans homelessness. You mentioned
10 that for veterans who are on the verge of homelessness,
11 there is little that VA can do or is doing. Many of the
12 benefits that are offered require veterans to be on the
13 streets before they are deemed eligible.

14 How does the VFW help these veterans, and how would you
15 improve the benefit programs to catch veterans before they
16 fall?

17 Mr. Schmitz. We have the Unmet Needs program, which
18 assists veterans who can apply. "The hot water heater
19 broke. I could not get my rent in on time," things of that
20 nature. It is a real quick thing. They owe us nothing.
21 They do not have to be a member. All they have to be is a
22 veteran or a family member of the veteran who is deployed.
23 They can get hold of our Kansas office and get some money to
24 help them over the hump.

25 Chairman Takano. So you do not actually have to be a

1 VFW member--

2 Mr. Schmitz. No, sir, you do not.

3 Chairman Takano. --to benefit from this VFW program.

4 Mr. Schmitz. That is correct. And that is also with
5 our Service Officer program to help them file claims,
6 whether it is a widow or a dependent or the veteran
7 themselves. We are free of charge.

8 Chairman Takano. Do you have any thoughts or any of
9 your staff have thoughts about how we can improve the
10 benefit programs to catch people before they fall?

11 Mr. Schmitz. Mr. Gallucci, please.

12 Mr. Gallucci. Thanks, Doc.

13 There are a number of ways that we can improve benefits
14 delivery for our veterans. Congress did very well by
15 passing the Appeals Modernization Act, but there are ways
16 that we can improve it.

17 Doc talked about the issue with standard forms created
18 some bureaucratic hurdles for our veterans in getting
19 through the benefit process. We do not understand why VA
20 went that route, especially with supplemental claims.

21 Another one that we would have to say is improvements
22 to IT infrastructure. The VFW stands ready to assist the
23 veterans anytime, anywhere from any reliable internet
24 connection, and as VA is building self-service tools for
25 veterans to file claims from any internet collection, we

1 stand ready to assist them in doing the same for competent
2 VA-accredited service providers, like our VFW service
3 officers.

4 Chairman Takano. Well, thank you, Mr. Gallucci.

5 My time is up. I now want to call on Dr. Roe for his
6 questions.

7 Dr. Roe. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

8 I want to take this being my last opportunity to be
9 here to thank Carlos. You really have an out standing
10 member here, and he is a great advocate for you. And I want
11 to give Carlos Fuentes a shout out. So thanks, Carlos, for
12 your friendship.

13 [Applause.]

14 Dr. Roe. Commander, you mentioned the VA staffing, and
15 it is not just a VA problem. It is a health care issue
16 across the country, staffing. We are going to be 120,000
17 physicians short in 10 short years, nursing shortages, and
18 other health care providers, and it is one of the reasons
19 that when we authored the MISSION Act, we realized that both
20 the private sector and the VA sector were going to be short
21 of people. So we had to share those resources, and I am
22 glad you mentioned telehealth. That is going to be one of
23 the ways we cover those. The VA has been at the forefront
24 of that.

25 I have been in many, many VAs across the country, and

1 they are even using it in ICUs, where you will have doctor
2 coverage in an ICU at an off-site where you have critical
3 care nurses and other people to help when they do not have
4 the personnel to. So we are going to have to learn how to
5 do better and share our personnel across the country.

6 Another thing that I want to bring up -- and you
7 mentioned appeals just a minute ago -- when I got to
8 Congress, there were a million claims in 2000. That is
9 amazing to me, a million backlogged claims in this country,
10 and that number, thank goodness, has been whittled down to a
11 very manageable number now. Mr. Lawrence wants to have that
12 number completely eradicated by July of this year, which I
13 think the VA needs a shout out for that. That was a huge
14 problem for veterans. I heard it every day, and I know
15 every person up here did when they went home. So I want to
16 give them a shout out.

17 One of the things very near and dear to my heart is the
18 VA services for women. I am glad--as you know, Commander,
19 the VA was set up basically after World War II for men
20 because that is who mainly served. I was trying to think
21 back when I was in my infantry division in the 2nd ID. I do
22 not remember a single female being there when I was there.
23 Now it is going to be as many as 20 percent of veterans are
24 going to be women.

25 The good news is 41 percent of eligible women are using

1 the VA now as opposed to 48 percent of eligible men.

2 I guess I would ask you. What suggestions do you have
3 to make it a more welcoming place, or how would we make it
4 better for the women who are coming there?

5 Mr. Schmitz. Well, the first thing is establish a
6 couple of committees where you get input, what is going
7 right and what is going wrong, and get that to the
8 appropriate people, the director of the specific facility in
9 relation to whatever. And I commend you for recognizing the
10 fact of the medical shortages on availability of hiring, but
11 like in yourself when you retire from this wonderful job,
12 you might reengage and do telehealth because you could
13 literally operate right out of your home.

14 Dr. Roe. I am going to the first TBOCs I can find,
15 Commander.

16 [Laughter.]

17 Dr. Roe. I thank you for being here, Commander. I
18 really appreciate that.

19 I yield back.

20 Mr. Schmitz. Thank you, sir.

21 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Dr. Roe.

22 I now call on--not Dr. Pappas, but Mr. Pappas for 3
23 minutes.

24 Mr. Pappas. Almost gave me a promotion there.

25 Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member

1 and to the members of this committee.

2 I really appreciate your words, Commander, a really
3 stirring testimony that you gave us here this morning. It
4 is evident that you represent the passion of so many
5 individuals in this room that have given so much to this
6 country. So I want to salute the leadership of the VFW and
7 Auxiliary as well as the membership who are here who are so
8 effective in delivering this message.

9 Something you said stuck with me. This is about not
10 making it easier on VA but about making sure the end veteran
11 who put everything on the line for this country is central
12 and is always central to what we are doing on this committee
13 and ultimately how we are serving those who have sacrificed.
14 So thank you for delivering that message loudly and clearly.
15 It is received, and we want to do all we can to implement
16 this agenda.

17 I want to give a shout out to my New Hampshire folks
18 who are here in the room. Please stand up and be recognized
19 if you are here.

20 [Applause.]

21 Mr. Pappas. Thank you very much. Great to see you
22 guys. Our small but mighty State does well caring for
23 veterans. So we appreciate your attendance here today.

24 One of the issues that our Subcommittee on Oversight
25 and Investigations has looked into on the House Veterans'

1 Affairs Committee is the issue of provider networks and
2 ensuring that as community care rolls forward with MISSION
3 Act that we are attracting providers, that they are being
4 paid in a timely fashion, so that community care can open
5 doors to our veterans to receive care in communities near
6 them. That is very crucial, especially in rural districts
7 like mine.

8 So I am wondering as you look at the VA's budget
9 request for Fiscal Year 2021 and community care specifically
10 if you feel like the resources are there to provide the back
11 office support and the framework that is needed to ensure
12 that MISSION Act can succeed.

13 Mr. Schmitz. Thank you, sir.

14 Mr. Fuentes, please.

15 Mr. Fuentes. The VFW is proud to partner with DAV and
16 Paralyzed Veterans of America to produce a veterans-specific
17 budget request or recommendation called "independent
18 budget." We feel that VA is about \$4 billion short
19 specifically on medical care, and we do feel that they need
20 more money to be able to hire more folks but also implement
21 important legislation like the expansion of the Caregiver
22 program.

23 Mr. Pappas. Thank you for the response.

24 One of the other things I noted in the testimony, you
25 mentioned Transition Assistance Program in the written

1 testimony, and I am wondering if you can elaborate a little
2 bit on a some of the changes we are seeing, any concerns you
3 might have as that moves forward.

4 Mr. Schmitz. Mr. Gallucci?

5 Mr. Gallucci. Thanks, Doc.

6 So the VFW has a presence on 25 military installations
7 through the Benefits Delivery at Discharge program. So we
8 are able to gather real-time information on what
9 servicemembers are seeing as they leave the military.

10 We are thankful for the changes that came through the
11 NDAA making sure that servicemembers had to serve a track.

12 One of the issues that I have to go back to, though, is
13 the parameters the Department of Veterans Affairs has put on
14 servicemembers getting out to file their benefit claims. We
15 used to have the BDD, Benefits Delivery at Discharge, or BDD
16 program and Quick Start where a servicemember anytime from
17 180 days to separate could file their benefit claim. VA
18 sunset the Quick Start program and moved the goalpost back
19 from 180 to 90 days.

20 What we see is that many times, the mission dictates
21 that servicemembers cannot meet the strain of that 90-day
22 period to file their benefit claims. Looking at our
23 numbers, probably about--I want to say about a quarter or a
24 third of our claims are excluded from the BDD program, even
25 though we are filing them on base for a servicemember.

1 I do not understand why VA went back on those programs,
2 but I think here we are, a couple of years later. It is
3 time to revisit this and make sure that we are setting up
4 transitioning servicemembers for success.

5 Mr. Pappas. Thanks for your comments.

6 [Applause.]

7 Mr. Pappas. I appreciate that, and just to reiterate,
8 we are here to serve you. Thank you for delivering the
9 message loudly and clearly.

10 I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

11 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Mr. Pappas.

12 I now call on Senator Tillis for 3 minutes.

13 Senator Tillis. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

14 Thank you all for being here.

15 Actually, I want to talk and maybe just go down the
16 line and ask a pretty--well, first off, I should say I met
17 with my--do we have any folks that are either from North
18 Carolina or spent some time in North Carolina when you were
19 in service? If you are out there, stand up.

20 [Applause.]

21 Senator Tillis. I had the opportunity to meet with
22 some of the gentlemen yesterday, and we were talking about
23 some just incredible cases, the work that you all do for our
24 veterans. It is amazing.

25 But one thing that I would really encourage you to do--

1 and I am sure I speak for every other member. I hear these
2 cases where you are helping veterans get the benefits that
3 they deserve, and I appreciate you doing that. But make
4 sure that you call on our office to do it first. Do not
5 call on our office when it gets hard. Call on our office to
6 do this casework. That is our job. We have done thousands
7 of cases in North Carolina.

8 So I want to make sure you all have the opportunity to
9 cast a wider net and find other veterans who are not getting
10 the service. So put the burden on us to do that casework
11 first, and if we cannot or there are particularly complex
12 cases, then maybe they can use your resources. But make
13 sure that you task us with doing the job because that is a
14 key part of what we are supposed to do, and I would
15 appreciate you all casting a wider net.

16 Now, I think in the limited time, I would just like to
17 ask you all. What more can we do to cast a wider net? How
18 do we find those veterans who are not in the VA that need
19 benefits and need help? What more do you think we can do as
20 a matter of work within the Congress to get out to those
21 folks who are not connected to the VA, the more than half of
22 the people who commit suicide every single day who have no
23 connection to the VA? Tell us what we should be focusing on
24 as a matter of policy to cast a wider net and do the right
25 thing by our veterans.

1 We will just start down the line here.

2 Mr. Rusakiewicz. Thank you, sir. I think what we are
3 doing in the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and I think it is
4 very important for all of us to do, and that is, of course,
5 to get the word out, to let veterans know that there is
6 competent, compassionate medical health care for them in the
7 VA system and help for their families if they need that.

8 So I think that it is a big thing to make sure that the
9 veterans coming out, when they are transitioning out, that
10 that is available to them or that that be told to them and
11 that they understand they are welcome in the VA system, they
12 and their families, and I think that is very important.

13 Senator Tillis. As you all go down the line, I chair
14 the Personnel Subcommittee on Senate Armed Services, and
15 what I want to do is figure out what more we can do in
16 transition to make sure that we are doing our part to get
17 them connected and make sure they are taking their benefits.

18 Mr. Gallucci. Thank you, Senator Tillis.

19 I think in the Transition Assistance Program, making
20 sure that servicemembers have access to the classes and the
21 briefings in a timely manner.

22 Again, operations will sometimes dictate--we see this a
23 lot with the Navy--that servicemembers cannot get into their
24 transition classes as quickly enough.

25 VA also should not be afraid to lean on non--I am

1 sorry--DoD should not be afraid to lean on nonmilitary
2 entities to assist, the way that we do on the installations
3 that we serve, but also for servicemembers who are looking
4 to go to college after they leave the military, just take
5 advantage of all the resources that they have, and make sure
6 that servicemembers go to TAP early, that they know that
7 they can go often, that there are people there to answer
8 their questions, and that their family members can attend as
9 well.

10 Mr. Schmitz. Mr. Gallucci hit it right on the head.

11 You want to catch them before they go, which means you
12 have got to talk to the guys and gals while they are in the
13 military and educate them what is available after.

14 The follow-up is what about the ones that we have not
15 caught, the Vietnam veterans who will not come forward, the
16 Korean War veterans who will not come forward, maybe Iraqi
17 and Afghan, Beirut. When you legislators pass good
18 legislation that VSOs have encouraged you to pass, that
19 sends a message to all of the ones that are out there that
20 are not in service now that maybe you qualify or come under
21 this, which drives them to our service officers who drives
22 them to the VA, and now we have got them. We have got them,
23 but you folks have to follow through with passing good
24 legislation like the Vietnam Agent Orange thing.

25 How many years did we wait for that? When that finally

1 came out, the guys and gals that were coming down with the
2 specific problems medically, now they have got a place to
3 go, and it explains what the heck was wrong with them to
4 start with. And thank you very much for doing some of that
5 stuff, each and every one of you. Thank you.

6 [Applause.]

7 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Senator Tillis, for your
8 questions.

9 I now want to call on the chairwoman of our Health
10 Subcommittee and the Women's Veterans Task Force, Julia
11 Brownley.

12 Ms. Brownley. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

13 Commander, I want to thank you for your 4 years of
14 service as a Marine, and even more importantly, I want to
15 thank you for your lifetime of service to our country and to
16 the veterans throughout our country. And I say thank you to
17 you, and I say thank you to your family because I know your
18 family support is very important in all of your endeavors.
19 So I appreciate it very, very much.

20 To the California VFW members who are here, welcome,
21 and thank you for being here. I thank each and every one of
22 you in this room for your service to our country. We
23 deeply, deeply are very, very grateful for it.

24 Commander, I thank you very much for mentioning the
25 Deborah Sampson Act in your testimony. It is an important

1 comprehensive bill. We are hoping very much, knock on wood,
2 that the Senate is going to take some action. Any help you
3 can give us on that, I would appreciate it very, very much.

4 But I just wonder if you could just sort of weigh in
5 for a moment on just what you believe some of the longer-
6 term challenges are that VA faces to prevent women from
7 receiving adequate services within the VA.

8 I think we are still working with the Veterans Women's
9 Task Force. We are still working on making the VA a
10 welcoming place, talk about stigma with mental health
11 issues. I think sometimes there is a fear of women
12 sometimes entering a VA facility for fear that they will not
13 be recognized as veterans or maybe just perceived as sort of
14 second class veterans.

15 But from your perspective, what do you think are some
16 of the challenges?

17 Mr. Schmitz. Some of the challenges or perspective--I
18 am sure everybody is familiar with Zumba. Two young ladies
19 came out from Zumba to get a beverage, and I walked up to
20 them and said, "Hi. How are you? Are you two veterans?"
21 and one young lady got very indignant and said, "Why would
22 you ask me that?" I says, "Well, because you are like in a
23 veterans VFW post." The other looks at me, "Well, we are."
24 I said, "Well, that is good. Where do you serve?" They
25 served in Afghanistan and stuff like that, so we shot the

1 breeze.

2 Bottom line is--how it works with me is, I do not care
3 what your gender is. If you served in uniform, it is up to
4 me, like up to you, to make sure I look out for your back
5 and you look out for my back because we are both veterans.

6 And on that note, I am going to turn it over to Mr.
7 Lawrence.

8 Mr. Lawrence. Thank you, Commander.

9 So we believe the VA, of course, is undergoing a
10 transformational move for caring for mostly males to
11 females. Women veterans, as we know, have different needs
12 which require doctors that know how to treat those needs.

13 You are absolutely correct. Congress must pass the
14 Deborah Sampson Act to address these important issues.

15 [Applause.]

16 Mr. Lawrence. Now, on the VA side of the house, they
17 must address not just the services it offers, but first and
18 foremost, the way they deliver those services. At the end
19 of the day, that is what matters to our women veterans.

20 Women veterans are more likely than nonveterans to
21 suffer from infertility; therefore, VA must improve
22 reproductive health services. I think we are on the right
23 track with VA, but I still think we have got a lot of
24 hurdles to overcome.

25 We have to improve privacy issues for our female

1 veterans. They need to feel comfortable when they go in for
2 those services, and certainly, the VFW is going to advocate
3 for that until the very end.

4 All of our veterans, no matter gender, should be able
5 to go to a VA facility and receive timely and adequate
6 health care because that is what they deserve, and that is
7 what we promised them.

8 Thank you.

9 [Applause.]

10 Ms. Brownley. Thank you very much.

11 Again, I salute you all. Thank you, and I yield back.

12 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Ms. Brownley.

13 I now call on Senator Sullivan for his 3 minutes.

14 Senator Sullivan. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is
15 great to be back in front of these wonderful patriotic
16 Americans.

17 I want to do a shout out to all the Alaskans here.
18 Thank you. How about a round of applause?

19 [Applause.]

20 Senator Sullivan. I always say we have got more
21 veterans per capita than any State in the country. Senator
22 Tillis from the great State of North Carolina reminds me his
23 normal rejoinder to that is "Well, we have more veterans in
24 North Carolina than you have people in Alaska," which is a
25 pretty good rebuttal. But I am still proud of ours, and my

1 constituents certainly get the award for coming the
2 farthest.

3 Thank you all again, and I want to thank the leadership
4 team here.

5 I also want to mention VFW Post 9785 in Eagle River,
6 Alaska. That is my VFW post.

7 We hosted Secretary Wilkie for a roundtable recently.
8 So thank you from not just the Eagle River Post, but all the
9 VFW for allowing us to do that. It was a great event.

10 I want to talk very briefly, Commander, just really for
11 the whole panel, but the VFA officially endorsed S. 2950.
12 That is my Veterans Burn Pits Exposure Recognition Act. The
13 whole idea there, we just have been dealing with Agent
14 Orange and the Blue Water Navy, and let us face it. That
15 has all been reactive for decades.

16 What we are trying to do with this bill is to be
17 proactive. We know there are going to be challenges. Let
18 us get in front of it.

19 What else can we be doing now on the issue of burn pit
20 exposure?

21 Mr. Schmitz. Well, the first thing is we got to get on
22 it as quick as possible. Otherwise, we are going to lose a
23 lot of good veterans like we did with Agent Orange, before
24 they figured out what the heck they ought to do.

25 Senator Sullivan. So your priority is to get the

1 Senate 2950 passed first.

2 Mr. Schmitz. Yes.

3 Mr. Fuentes has got some information on that.

4 Mr. Fuentes. Senator, thank you very much for
5 introducing that bill, and that will certainly address some
6 of the hurdles that we see now for veterans exposed to burn
7 pits to receive benefits.

8 We certainly support your bill and urge passage, but
9 what we really need is a permanent comprehensive framework
10 to take a look at the anecdotes and then take it to benefit
11 to look at the research and essentially evaluate. We have
12 enough evidence to now provide benefits.

13 Senator Sullivan. Okay.

14 Mr. Fuentes. We need those presumptive benefits. Your
15 bill goes a long way, but we still need to establish
16 presumptive benefits.

17 We do not have a framework now, and we propose to
18 establish a framework not only for Agent Orange, which was
19 successful for Agent Orange, but one that would be forward
20 looking, to take a look at what is out there now, but also
21 set it up in place so that Congress does not have to address
22 each individual exposure when it pops up.

23 Senator Sullivan. Thank you for that, and we look
24 forward to working with you.

25 Mr. Chairman, I know my time--

1 [Applause.]

2 Senator Sullivan. I know my time is up, but I did want
3 to just mention, since we have two strong veteran supporters
4 here, Senator Sinema and Representative Brownley.

5 Yesterday, Senator Sinema and I introduced the Reduce
6 Unemployment for Veterans of All Ages Act, which I think the
7 VFW is looking at as one of their priorities as well, and
8 Representative Brownley is the House lead on that. So I
9 think we have a good team right here on one of your other
10 top priorities.

11 I am going to submit some questions, additional
12 questions for the record.

13 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

14 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Senator.

15 I now call on Congressman Cisneros for 3 minutes.

16 Mr. Cisneros. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you
17 to all the representatives from the VFW that are here today.

18 If anybody is here from Southern California, I would
19 love to have you stand up and be recognized. There we go.
20 There we go.

21 [Applause.]

22 Mr. Cisneros. So my father is a Vietnam veteran, and
23 he is a lifetime member of the VFW. I am a proud Navy
24 veteran as well, and I just recently this year finally
25 purchased my lifetime membership with the CFW.

1 [Applause.]

2 Mr. Cisneros. I am proud to be a member.

3 Commander Schmitz, you mentioned in your testimony
4 about the importance of the adoptive automobile grant. Can
5 you expand on that, like some of the things why that is
6 important, and what you are hearing from your membership on
7 that issue?

8 Mr. Schmitz. I will defer to Mr. Fuentes again. Thank
9 you.

10 Mr. Fuentes. What we have seen is that, again,
11 disabilities tend to get worse, and the automotive grant is
12 an excellent way to adapt vehicles to ensure that severely
13 disabled veterans can drive. However, the life of a vehicle
14 is about 10 years. The life of a disability is for the life
15 of that veteran.

16 We have several veterans, several members, who have had
17 to purchase other vehicles and adapt them from their own
18 pocket, and we fully believe that this benefit should be
19 repetitive. And folks should be able to use it for multiple
20 times, not just that one time.

21 Mr. Cisneros. Well, I wanted to let you know today I
22 am working on legislation that, hopefully, will amend the VA
23 Adoptive Vehicle Grant program to allow veterans to qualify
24 for a new vehicle every 10 years, like you just stated.

25 [Applause.]

1 Mr. Cisneros. And this is directly due to the issues
2 that we have heard from the VSOs like yourself, the VFW, and
3 hearing from veteran constituents in my district as well.
4 So this is definitely a need that we need to make sure that
5 we take care of.

6 Just to kind of change gears here real quick, something
7 that I have been working on is really that transition out of
8 military service into becoming a veteran. I think we can do
9 better with the TAP. That is why one of the reasons I
10 actually started a caucus focused on TAP.

11 But I would love to hear from you. What can we learn
12 from the VFW, the DoD, that the different services could put
13 into their TAP classes that is not there right now?

14 Mr. Schmitz. Mr. Lawrence?

15 Mr. Lawrence. Thank you, Mr. Cisneros.

16 I just recently returned from Naval Base San Diego and
17 Fort Bragg and had an opportunity to see some of the TAP
18 classes and programs in place. Following up on earlier
19 statements from our Commander, one of the first problems we
20 noticed with the TAP classes is we recognized that the
21 individual combatant commanders have the authority to place
22 mission first. That is highly affecting the military member
23 from getting into that TAP class in that allotted window and
24 also give them an opportunity to be exposed to the services.

25 We think that information as it pertains to VSOs is

1 still highly vital in those tap briefings. We understand
2 and recognize that early on, there were some problems with
3 some contracts as it pertains to the presenters, the private
4 contract vendors that present the TAP classes, but our
5 understanding is that that is now being addressed and
6 hopefully should be ironed out.

7 Bottom line is we have got to force a way that that
8 military member can get through that program in enough time.
9 Joint Naval Base San Diego, for an example, 9,000
10 transitioning servicemembers every year, that is a lot of
11 servicemembers transitioning from the military out into
12 society. We owe it to them to set them up for success and
13 give them the best possible opportunity to transition to
14 civilian life.

15 Mr. Cisneros. I could not agree more, and I will tell
16 you as long as I am here in Congress, I will continue to
17 work on that issue.

18 I just want to thank you all that are here today for
19 your service to our country. Thank you.

20 I yield back.

21 [Applause.]

22 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Mr. Cisneros.

23 I now call on Senator Boozman for 3 minutes.

24 Senator Boozman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank
25 all of you all for being here.

1 Where are my Arkansas guys?

2 [Applause.]

3 Senator Boozman. Very good. We appreciate them as
4 being so representative of you. They do a tremendous job in
5 our State.

6 Thank you for being here. We appreciate the hard work.

7 We work really hard as a committee in a very bipartisan
8 way, both on the Senate side and the House side. I have had
9 the opportunity to serve on both committees. But we cannot
10 do it without the grass roots, and as you look around the
11 room and you see standing room only, that is impressive.

12 Thank you for doing that. I know it is a hassle for you all
13 to come, but again, that is what it is all about.

14 The other thing is I see the Auxiliary. Thank you all.
15 We know who does all the work, so a big special shout out to
16 you all.

17 [Applause.]

18 Senator Boozman. But I want to thank you, for one
19 thing. I want to thank you for your advocacy regarding
20 veteran suicide, trying to do things a little bit
21 differently. A number of the people that are committing
22 suicide do not have touch with the VA. So, with your help,
23 we are trying to make it such that we do a better job of
24 working through community programs that are doing a good job
25 so that we identify those people and then get them into the

1 VA, get them help through other aspects.

2 The other thing is that we are working very, very hard.
3 Right now, we are measuring suicide success, not on the
4 number of people committing suicide, but access and throwing
5 money at it. So that has got to change. We are spending a
6 lot of additional funds, and yet we are not seeing the rate
7 go down significantly.

8 So we want to measure. Those programs that are working
9 well, we want to beef up. Those that are not working well,
10 we need to get rid of them.

11 I would like to ask you a little bit about one thing
12 that is hugely important, and that is health care for women
13 veterans. The total population of women veterans is
14 expected to increase at an average rate of 18,000 women per
15 year for the next 10 years.

16 Mr. Schmitz, what are some of the key areas where we
17 can increase resources and expand upon previous efforts to
18 best meet the future needs of women veterans?

19 Mr. Schmitz. By hiring more professionals specific to
20 anatomical differences, i.e., OB/GYN. There is an incident.
21 The female veteran population is more susceptible to birth
22 defects than the males just for biological reasons. Other
23 things are user-friendly environments. Create a local
24 committee, a veterans committee in a respective VA that
25 might not have one. I found most of them do have one,

1 though. Engage in a conversation with not only health
2 professionals, but the veteran community itself, and get a
3 female veteran committee going. Make sure on these
4 committees, you have a few females on there to give good
5 input to increase a discussion.

6 With that, we will move forward, providing you keep
7 giving them money to do it.

8 Senator Boozman. Right.

9 Mr. Schmitz. Remember, give them money.

10 Senator Boozman. Money is important.

11 [Applause.]

12 Senator Boozman. And then again ,we need to measure
13 what is working.

14 Then the other thing that is so important that you al
15 are helping with is just the idea that now, sadly,
16 occasionally, a woman will be in a VA hospital and somebody
17 will come up and ask where their husband is at. So we are
18 getting away from those kind of things, and again, that is
19 because of a change in attitudes. You all are very helpful
20 in that regard too.

21 Thank you.

22 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Senator Boozman.

23 I call on Senator Tester for 3 minutes.

24 Senator Tester. Thank you, Chairman Takano, and I want
25 to once again thank you all for being here. And I would

1 also be remiss if I did not point out that money should
2 never be an excuse when it comes to taking care of our
3 veterans.

4 [Applause.]

5 Senator Tester. If you cannot take care of them, you
6 ought not send them off to war to begin with.

7 [Applause.]

8 Senator Tester. Commander Schmitz, I will ask this
9 question, and you can answer or you can defer to anybody you
10 want, of course. You know that. But I will tell you that
11 to say that the VA has botched implementation of the
12 Caregivers expansion would be a compliment. It has not gone
13 well. It is a huge disappointment to me that the VA has not
14 kept to the schedule that it laid out in 2018 when we passed
15 the VA MISSION Act.

16 The VA are telling us that they have not put into place
17 an IT system that can support the expanded Caregivers
18 program. That is just totally not acceptable.

19 So, Commander Schmitz, from your point of view, could
20 you tell us what it means to disabled veterans and their
21 caregivers, many of them elderly, many of them shouldering
22 this burden for far too long themselves, to wait even
23 another month for caregiver benefits?

24 Mr. Schmitz. You are darn right on that one. It is
25 sad, and who has more specific feedback on that is Carlos

1 Fuentes.

2 Mr. Fuentes. Caregivers give up their jobs to care for
3 their loved ones, and it is completely demeaning that this
4 program has not expanded to pre-9/11 veterans.

5 The Secretary promised last week that he would put out
6 the regulations this week, and again, we have not seen it.
7 So, hopefully, that is not delayed, but we certainly
8 appreciate your support to keeping the pressure on. It
9 should not be delayed any further.

10 Folks are suffering. We need that support, and it
11 needs to be expanded now.

12 Senator Tester. Yeah. I mean, I think for a quality
13 of life standpoint, that speaks enough, but it may cost a
14 little money up front to get this thing going. I think long
15 term, it is going to save the VA dollars, and it is going to
16 improve quality of life for veterans. So time is of the
17 essence.

18 Really quickly, Commander, I want you to talk about the
19 electronic health records. Has the VA requested your input
20 on electronic health records?

21 Mr. Schmitz. Well, we will talk to the man who
22 receives the call. Mr. Gallucci?

23 Mr. Gallucci. All right. Thank you, Doc.

24 We were expecting it to expand to Mann-Grandstaff in
25 Spokane later this month, That was delayed. I would like

1 to think--and it was confirmed a little bit earlier this
2 week by some of our comrades--that the VFW helps to play a
3 role in that.

4 What we heard from VA is "We have done extensive
5 outreach to VSOs, provided training, so the VSOs are very
6 well aware of what is going to happen at Mann-Grandstaff."
7 So, naturally, we reached out to our network of VA voluntary
8 service volunteers who volunteer at the hospital--I think of
9 them is here, Jerry Herker from the State of Washington--
10 also our service officers who operate out of the Spokane Vet
11 Center. They had not heard anything.

12 Jerry pulled me aside at this conference and said,
13 "Hey, BJ, Ryan, I got to give you some credit because we
14 were finally reached out to and briefed on what is going to
15 happen with the expansion of the EHRM at Mann-Grandstaff."
16 They were behind the eight ball. They need to communicate
17 better with the VSOs because we have that community reach.
18 We have the boots on the ground, and that is the only way
19 that this is going to get done and done right.

20 Senator Tester. I just want to say this. Thank you
21 very much for making sure that your voice is being heard.
22 We will help you on that too.

23 I have got respect for the leadership in the VA. I
24 think that they want to do the right thing. I think their
25 strings are being pulled by other people, and I do not want

1 to let Wilkie off the hook or Stone off the hook or any of
2 those guys. But the bottom line is that the VA needs to
3 understand that we are all on the same team--

4 Mr. Gallucci. Yes.

5 Senator Tester. --and that if we work together, we can
6 live up to our promises we have made to the fighting men and
7 women of those country.

8 Thank you, Commander. Thank you, everybody who is in
9 the room today.

10 [Applause.]

11 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Senator Tester.

12 I now call on Mr. Bilirakis for 3 minutes.

13 Senator Bilirakis. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I
14 appreciate it so much. I will be as brief as I can. I know
15 I only have 3 minutes.

16 Commander Schmitz, as you know, enacting concurrent
17 receipt for disabled military veterans and retirees has been
18 a priority for the VFW for years and again a priority of
19 mine for many years, as it was a priority for my father, and
20 he really made a lot of progress in this area.

21 How do these unfair offsets impact your members, sir?

22 Mr. Schmitz. Part of it, obviously, is financial, but
23 it is great to retire. It is a wonderful thing, but then
24 when you find out that all of a sudden, you have acquired a
25 disability that possibly forced you out of the military and

1 forced you to retire, you did not seek it out. It happened
2 to you. Then when you compromise somebody because of that,
3 that is, first of all, demoralizing. It is like, "What
4 happened to that?" They are two different things that are
5 given for two separate reasons.

6 I think it should have never happened to start with,
7 and I commend you for taking point on this and trying to
8 drive this thing back where it ought to be. Bottom line is
9 if you are entitled to both, you should get both without
10 either of them being compromised. It is not fair. It is
11 not right.

12 [Applause.]

13 Mr. Schmitz. And some of that money that that
14 particular veteran gets, it goes back into the local system
15 which some of it gets taxed that goes back to where it came
16 from to start with. So it is not an all-win on one end of
17 the street. The bottom line is the guy or gal that was
18 compromised gets taken care of, and God bless you for taking
19 point on that, sir.

20 Senator Bilirakis. Thank you. Thank you. I
21 appreciate that.

22 We filed, as you know, the Major Richard Star Act, and
23 I am grateful for the VFW taking the lead on this. We need
24 several cosponsors in the House, and I know there is a
25 Senate bill too.

1 I believe Senator Tester is the sponsor as week as
2 Senator Tillis.

3 It restores retirement benefits for Chapter 61 veterans
4 who were wounded in combat. Again, elaborate, if you can--
5 and I think you have done a pretty good job--and tell us why
6 this bill should be a priority.

7 Mr. Schmitz. Mr. Fuentes?

8 Mr. Fuentes. Thank you, Congressman, again for taking
9 the lead on this bill.

10 As he pointed out, taking care of full concurrent
11 receipts would be about \$30 billion over 10 years; however,
12 Congress should chip away at this unjust benefit by first
13 eliminating the offset for those who were discharged through
14 their combat service. It is important that we show some
15 progress. It is important that we do not allow this to just
16 continue to stay idle like it has for so many years, and
17 thank you for that.

18 You have the VFW's full support to do what it takes to
19 get it past the finish line.

20 Senator Bilirakis. Thank you so much, and let us get
21 this done.

22 I appreciate it, Mr. Chairman, for your time, and I
23 yield back.

24 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Mr. Bilirakis.

25 I now call on Senator Sinema for 3 minutes.

1 Senator Sinema. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

2 Greetings to the Arizona veterans who have joined us
3 today, and thank you to our witnesses for being here. It
4 has been my pleasure to work with the VFW to ensure that
5 servicemembers and veterans receive the care and benefits
6 they have earned, and I am proud to have introduced this in
7 a companion to the Reduce Unemployment for Older Veterans
8 Act with Senators Sullivan, Hoeven, and Senator Tillis.

9 This bill eliminates the 12-year eligibility period for
10 vocational rehabilitation employment services, and special
11 thanks to Congresswoman Brownley for her leadership with the
12 House bill. And I look forward to working with the
13 committee to pass this legislation.

14 My first question is for Commander Schmitz. VFW has
15 been a strong advocate to remove the 12-year eligibility
16 period for the vocational rehabilitation and employment
17 services. What is the impact of this benefit for disabled
18 veterans, and why is removal of the eligibility period so
19 important?

20 Mr. Schmitz. It is important. As we all know, you
21 acquire a disability, with aging process alone, you become
22 more and more compromised. Things become more and more
23 difficult. They tend to overflow medically into other
24 issues.

25 The individual in order to be vibrant in the community,

1 vibrant at home, needs to be able to be as mobile as
2 possible, given any circumstances that you can provide
3 whatsoever to help them accommodate themselves to get to a
4 new job, modify their training, so they can qualify for--
5 "Now all of a sudden, I cannot do the walking required in
6 this particular job. How can I transition and be trained
7 into a job where I can still get there, but I am going to
8 have to sit in a chair for quite a while to do it?" This is
9 critical to keep them active in the community and as an
10 active, productive person in our society, and it is a "thank
11 you very much" for being compromised. We are going to do
12 the best we can continually as you live.

13 And Mr. Lawrence will continue on that.

14 Mr. Lawrence. Thank you.

15 VR&E provides critical counseling and other adjunct
16 services necessary to enable service-disabled veterans to
17 overcome barriers as they prepare for, find, and maintain
18 gainful employment.

19 Service-disabled veterans must have the opportunity to
20 use VR&E services at any point--I stress at any point during
21 their employable lives when service-connected disabilities
22 interfere with their employment and when economic changes
23 require them to learn new skills.

24 The VFW hears commonly from veterans that they did not
25 even apply for VR&E because they did not think they were

1 eligible due to that 12-year limitation. We have got to
2 change that.

3 Thank you.

4 Senator Sinema. Thank you.

5 [Applause.]

6 Senator Sinema. Commander Schmitz, in your statement,
7 you indicated that the VFW is concerned that the amount of
8 time to process an authorization for a veteran to receive
9 care in the community is taking far too long. I
10 wholeheartedly agree. This is what we hear at our office as
11 well.

12 It is unacceptable that a veteran whose clinician has
13 authorized a community care consult is waiting nearly a
14 month or even longer to have their appointment with the
15 provider scheduled, not to get the appointment, to get the
16 appointment for the appointment.

17 So this was meant to be a seamless process. How do we
18 fix this problem?

19 Mr. Schmitz. Increase their IT functions. Bring them
20 up to speed. Turn a lot of the stuff over to the community
21 VA. They know the local health providers. Some of them
22 actually work at the VA or are recipients of a referral.
23 They know the local weather and when you would want to send
24 somebody where for what.

25 In one place in New York, the scheduler at one time

1 scheduled this guy to go for his appointment. It was in the
2 middle of the winter, the roads and stuff were not real
3 good. Bad choice.

4 Another one, they sent him to the wrong eye doctor
5 three times, because the eye doctor did not do the procedure
6 necessarily, but you had quirks who had no medical
7 background making an appointment.

8 So you need to engage the local VA to engage the local
9 health providers. They know what they have got out there.
10 They live in the community, and they know the doctors and
11 nurse practitioners or PAs that they could get appointments
12 with.

13 Senator Sinema. Thank you.

14 Mr. Schmitz. Thank you.

15 Senator Sinema. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield
16 back.

17 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Senator Sinema.

18 I now call on Mr. Lamb for his 3 minutes.

19 Mr. Lamb. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank all of
20 you. I want to especially recognize the Pennsylvania
21 delegation that came by my office yesterday.

22 [Applause.]

23 Mr. Lamb. I do not know what sins you have committed
24 between now and then that they did not give you a seat to
25 sit in here today, but just rest assured that I am proud of

1 you for whatever it was.

2 Gentlemen on the panel, I wanted to ask about the four
3 conditions that have been denied presumptive status for
4 Agent Orange. I am sure others have probably covered this
5 before I got here.

6 I represent a very large population of Vietnam
7 veterans, some of whom are suffering from these conditions.
8 Particularly, hypertension, I think, is very common.

9 We have spoken to Secretary Wilkie as recently as last
10 week. We have all conveyed how disappointed we are in what
11 is happening. I get the sense that most of the opposition
12 is in the White House, at OMB, more so than in the VA, but
13 regardless, I was just hoping someone on our panel today
14 could talk about whether you know and represent veterans
15 suffering from these four conditions as well and what it is
16 doing to their lives and to their morale that they have not
17 been given this presumptive status just yet.

18 Mr. Schmitz. Well, to start with, sir, I am one of
19 them, and I am a mushroom farm for skin cancer. I am also a
20 registered nurse by profession. These conditions--someone
21 once said, well, the Agent Orange thing has expired. Well,
22 you know something? So are my brother and sister Vietnam
23 veterans expiring, and we need to--science has substantiated
24 there is a correlation, undeniable, between those
25 conditions.

1 Why the VA is dragging their derriere in relation to
2 addressing them, in addressing them before there is no one
3 to address them to, I am totally baffled.

4 Mr. Lawrence, could you expound on that, please?

5 Mr. Lawrence. Thank you, Commander.

6 So our argument has been all along, the scientific
7 evidence already meets the established statutory
8 requirements to add the four to the presumptives.

9 As the commander said, sometimes we feel like we have
10 gone through the same battle before with Agent Orange. As
11 he mentioned, our Vietnam veterans are getting older in age.
12 It is almost like if we kicked the can down the road long
13 enough, we will not have any Vietnam veterans to take care
14 of.

15 [Applause.]

16 Mr. Lamb. That is the impression. absolutely.

17 Mr. Lawrence. And by the way, Mr. Lamb, by the way,
18 Vietnam veterans make up close to 60 percent of our
19 membership in the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United
20 States.

21 Mr. Lamb. Absolutely.

22 Mr. Lawrence. It is time to take care of them.

23 Mr. Lamb. And a growing share of the VA population.

24 Just in my remaining seconds, for anyone who has not
25 seen these numbers, this is not about mon economy. It

1 should not be about money because of the service that these
2 Vietnam veterans have rendered.

3 [Applause.]

4 Mr. Lamb. Thank you. I did not even get to my point
5 yet.

6 The VA is requesting a \$22 billion budget increase just
7 this year alone, and they have projected that the 5-year
8 cost of taking care of these veterans is 11- to \$15 billion.

9 OMB is approving a \$22 billion increase in a single
10 year and denying a smaller 11- to \$15 billion cost over the
11 next 5 years. That is really important for everyone in this
12 room to know. It is not about money. It is not about
13 fiscal responsibility. It is about which veterans you want
14 to take care of when, and they are waiting you out. That is
15 wrong, and we are going to keep the pressure on them.

16 Thank you, gentleman, all for being here.

17 [Applause.]

18 Mr. Lamb. And I yield back.

19 Mr. Schmitz. Chairman, I do have one comment.

20 Chairman Takano. Sure.

21 Mr. Schmitz. I can speak freely for the Vietnam
22 veterans. We do not want to see the same thing that
23 happened to us in relation to Agent Orange happening to our
24 brothers and sisters with TBI and our brothers and sisters
25 that were exposed to burn pits. We are firm on that. We

1 want this addressed now before many of them die.

2 Thank you.

3 Chairman Takano. Thank you, sir.

4 [Applause.]

5 Chairman Takano. Commander, as Chairman, I hear you
6 loud and clear. I want to thank Mr. Lamb for taking on this
7 issue in such a dogged way. I believe this issue needs to
8 be made too hot to handle, that anyone who wants to touch it
9 is going to get burned unless they do the right thing. So
10 thank you so much for your advocacy.

11 I am told that Chairman Moran does not have questions.

12 I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for
13 you, all of you, making the journey to Washington to
14 exercise your constitutional rights, your democratic rights,
15 to petition in Congress, to make your voices heard.

16 I want you to know that you, the Veterans of Foreign
17 Wars, as a nonpartisan organization of veterans, the fact
18 that you are veterans, you have a voice that is very
19 special. It is a moral voice. It is a voice of conscience,
20 and as Senator Tester said, if we do not have the money to
21 care for our veterans, we should not be sending them to war
22 in the first place I wholeheartedly associate myself with
23 that sentiment. It is not about money. It is about what is
24 doing right by you, and as Chairman, I am determined to make
25 sure that these four conditions are listed as presumptive.

1 I thank you for your advocacy.

2 With that, I want to just call this hearing to a close.

3 Before I do that, all members will have 5 legislative days
4 to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous
5 material.

6 Thank you again for your presentation, and this hearing
7 is now adjourned.

8 [Applause.]

9 [Whereupon, at 11:35 a.m., the joint hearing was
10 adjourned.]

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